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Frustrated Voices of Art Assessment

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Frustrated Voices

Artroom

In the early 1990s, the leadership in art education hotly debated the pros and cons of adopting national standards for art education (Eisner, 1993; Hausman, 1994). Would the standardization of the art curriculum "water down" or eliminate important basic creative components of art?

What instructional and assessment consequences would result following the establishment of standards? Previously Lowenfeld and Brittain (1982) argued that there should be one place in the school system where grades do not count. "The art room should be the sanctuary against school regulations, where each youngster is free to be himself and put down his feelings and emotions without censorship, where he can evaluate his own progress toward his own goals without the imposition of an arbitrary grading system" (p.163).

Dr. Lowenfeld's theory of art education has been replaced by a discipline-based form of art education that includes art production, art criticism, art history, and aesthetics. The four disciplines are integrated into students' experiences in the art program and ideally are integrated across the curriculum (Greer, 1984). DBAE (Discipline-Based Art Education) became the foundation for National Standards in 1994. When the Standards were adopted by NAEA, the content and expectations for student experiences and levels of student achievement were articulated (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994). The Standards were subsequently written

into federal law as part of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Public Law 103-227). The standardization of a national curriculum gave art education equal footing with history, English, science, and social studies. Subsequently, current public opinion polls suggest that the implementation and raising of academic standards is a move in the right direction (*Business Roundtable*, 2001; *Public Agenda*, 2000).

Now that the celebration of the adoption of the National Standards has abated, the reality has begun to sink in. Art teachers and supervisors are charged with interpreting standards for state and local use. The ambiguous nature of the National Standards, however, makes it difficult to define what all students should know and learn. Some local curriculum planners interpreted the National Standards differently and developed clear, specific standards that helped focus the outcomes and objectives for programs with an eye to very specific results. However, those guides are cumbersome, at best, leaving the individual teacher with the task of making difficult choices about what is essential for all students to learn. The ambiguous, less-specific curriculum guides are equally difficult to interpret,

of Art Assessment

BY BARBARA J. BENSUR

providing teachers with opportunities to apply many standards to one or two well-developed lesson plans. Due to the dramatic increase in public access to information about student performance via the Internet and other public resources, teachers are now faced with the dilemma of accounting for learning and developing specific assessments that measure what students know and should be able to do while preserving the unique creative nature of art.

Wilson (1998) cautions "...the way we structure assessment, the way we specify outcomes and standards has the potential to shape arts education both positively and negatively. Once something gets into the arts educational system, once certain conceptions of the arts and learning are codified, they remain for a very long time" (p. 3). The codification of standards begins with serious conversations between all stakeholders: parents, teachers, administrators, and students. This dialogue can help focus everyone's attention on student achievement. However, "poorly devised and implemented standards and assessment have the potential to become a distraction and a source of frustration" (Gandel & Vranek, 2001, p. 8).

Assessment Practices in the Classroom

This article focuses on an opinion survey (Sabol, 1999) gathered from 269 art teachers in Pennsylvania in fall 1999. Teacher opinions were measured by responses to twenty questions on a scale of "A" to "E" (A = strongly agree to E = strongly disagree) and six open-ended response items. Results indicate that standards have driven the way assessment is used in art classrooms. As expected, the majority of art teachers reported that they use assessment to grade student achievement, but, more importantly, they use assessment to set student goals and standards. As one teacher commented "Assessment has enabled me to 'collect' more descriptive data via criteria-based and skilled-based measurements."

An important part of measuring standards in art is the application of tactile and visual skills that are necessary to the development of creative and critical thinking. Those skills cannot be measured with a single instrument. The majority of teachers reported that they used assessment to provide feedback about learning to the students. Seven out of 10 teachers said they used assessment to diagnose student needs and to provide instructional feedback to further students' understanding of the material. The bottom line? One teacher wrote,

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"Assessment has created strong student desire to improve art skills and knowledge. My students value what we do and how we do it." Another teacher commented that "Assessment has 'allowed' judgments of strategy and aesthetic quality to be more reliable. Gains in aesthetic thinking were 'improved' from periodic assessment. Strong assessment 'brought' about improved skill learning with my students, too."

Issues of Concern

Despite the readily acknowledged practical uses of assessment in art, there are also issues of real concern. While many art educators are up to the challenge of assessment, many school boards are reluctant to acknowledge the time it takes to assess effectively. Stiggins (2001) notes that lack of time to assess is a common complaint registered by teachers. Opinion survey respondents reported assignments of 400 to 800 students per week, preparation involved in teaching from an "art cart," time needed to adapt and modify expectations for special needs students, and lack of quick and effective assessment tools. One teacher responded "Too many children to assess and too often. I only see students once a week for 45 minutes a class. It is difficult to keep all records, still spend as much time as possible in direct interaction with students and preparation of materials, and adapt for special needs student." With limited resources and excessive students, art teachers rely on their districts to provide effective training in making assessment part of the on-going artistic process. However, assessment training workshops are often delivered to district-wide teaching populations regardless of content specific needs, thus creating frustration for art teachers whose assessment issues are significantly different from other disciplines.

Unlike other subject areas, assessment in art focuses on performance assessment, which dictates a product as an end result of a problem-solving activity. This process is also referred to as authentic assessment that uses realistic, meaningful, open-ended problems as a means of evaluating student learning (Beattie, 1997). Authentic assessment is used by artists involved in the creative process. By modeling critical reflective thinking for our students, we provide tools for students to assess their own work. One teacher wrote "A supportive system in the art classroom provides the student with the ability to self-assess while in progress and at the end of the project. They recognize personal levels of achievement." It would seem that preparing students to assess their work independent of the teacher may improve their self-esteem and confidence, which could encourage the teacher to concentrate on the process of making art rather than just assessing the end product (Stiggins, 2001).

A major component of any end product in art is creativity, and art education has had a long-standing love affair with the notion of creativity. Viktor Lowenfeld made creativity the cornerstone of his theory of art education. He stated that "It is much more important to develop creativity than competence in children" (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1970, p.46). As a result of the 1965 Penn State Seminar in Art Education (Mattil, 1966), the Lowenfeld paradigm was phased out in favor of DBAE. Despite the field's movement toward DBAE, teachers continued to embrace the notion of creativity. How creativity is defined has undergone a number of iterations depending on time and place. It has been defined as that "Aha" or "Eureka" moment, a flash of brilliance, divine intervention, a happy accident, or simply a talent determined by genetics. Wright (1990) states that "The creative act is a holistic one. It requires blending of

concept and feeling, analysis and intuition. Feeling and knowing become one, and the artist recognizes the merits of relying on the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of solutions based on his or her increased awareness and sensitivity to the selected problem" (p. 54). Feelings, intuition, "rightness," "wrongness," awareness, sensitivity all become words that have pushed art programs to the periphery of the school curriculum. In a time when "what gets measured, gets funded" it has become an awesome burden for art educators to explain, defend, and quantify creativity to remain a viable component of today's public school curriculum.

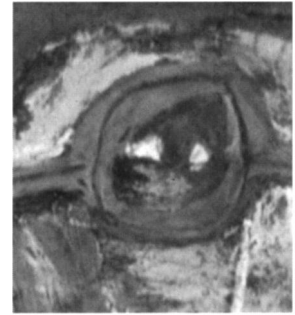
Taylor (1966) reminds us that "In the arts the way that knowledge is gained is part of the knowledge itself: how we find out is an inseparable part of what we find out" (p. 49). It becomes a delicate process to dissect those components of the artistic process and evaluate them separately without losing the essence of creation. Performance in the arts has been referred to as an integrated act of creativity in which students interpret, create, self-evaluate, and connect the experience to their lives both within and outside of school (Wilson, 1998). Respondents to the opinion survey indicated that it is difficult to assess student artwork with one set of criteria when variations of talent, socio-economic, cultural, and language issues may exist in one classroom. Teachers reported that students often feel pressured to stick to what they can do well to get a good grade and choose not to experiment. There is also the danger of misjudging art that shows latent potential. Teachers expressed concern that assessment is difficult when students take the project in many different directions, compounding the dilemma in assessing creativity. The majority of respondents questioned the viability of assessing personal expression, and a large number reported

that student artwork should not be assessed. It would appear that the logic for developing a system of accountability would benefit art teachers but many reported that assessment has the potential for "stifling creativity" if criteria are too specific. Students concerned about grades have a tendency to perform within stated objectives and suppress creativity to produce work that the teacher will find acceptable.

Just as the creation of art is as unique as the individual who creates it, so is the evaluation of the artwork by the teacher (Stiggins, 2001). In contradiction to the use of rubrics, Day (1985) reports that many times art is graded "arbitrarily" by the teacher's idea of what is "good or bad art" (p. 239). One teacher from the opinion survey called for a "balance between the emotional affects that art can provide and the more cognitive affects and artistic skill development" found in student artwork. Another teacher wrote that students view themselves as having talent or not having talent and perceive their assessment based on those notions without taking into account hard work and diligence.

Developing Effective Assessment

Wolf and Reardon (1996) argued that accountability begins with effective assessment instruments grounded on basic fairness principles that dictate that students should have access to evaluation criteria, i.e., they should know the criteria by which their work will be evaluated. They referred to this as "making thinking visible" and "making excellence attainable." How can we expect excellence from our students when we don't always provide them with clear, understandable guidelines by which to succeed?



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How does the average art teacher begin building a system of assessment to improve the quality of his or her art program? Frederiksen and Collins (1989) suggest using a form of assessment they call "transparency." Transparency implies that features of excellent performance are so apparent that students could learn to evaluate their own work in the same way their teachers would. This is a daunting task in art education where the solutions to a problem are not always black and white and often require a great deal of gray area to make them visually interesting. In the opinion survey, teachers who advocate for "transparency assessment" in their classrooms comment that students learn the importance of measuring their progress and approach assessment as the opportunity for developing life-long skills of self-evaluation. This skill development could inform their artmaking for the rest of their lives.

As students learn to self-assess, that assessment needs to be grounded on realistic expectations that enhance the making of art. Wilson (1998) commenting on standardized exams notes that "when content of an examination reflects incomplete or short sighted notions of creation, performance and study of art, art education is fragmented and lacks vision" (p. 3). The same could be said about art assessment in general. When educators set out to assess artwork based on "shortsighted notions of creation" performance and study of art suffer. Assessment can be used to plan effectively for success in the art classroom when procedures are clear, articulated, and used properly. However, many times art teachers are afraid of curtailing and inhibiting student creativity and provide only a broad framework for student problem solving. They avoid setting attainable standards or stating clearly defined goals and objectives that go beyond what we think the student is capable of. Creating

standards for exemplary work, not just standards of excellence, should be an everyday classroom practice. Beattie (1997) notes that a well designed assessment "provides the students with information about the time of the assessment; special conditions and procedures; content to be covered; type of performance expected; how the performance will be judged, scored, weighted; and possible ramifications of performance results" (p. 9).

Summary

Is there one answer to the frustrations of assessment in the art classroom? As Jerome Hausman (1994) states "...it would be foolhardy to pretend that there are multiple choice or machine scored tests that would fully assess the learning that takes place in an art class" (p. 13). Over and over again the opinion survey respondents reported that teachers need to provide students the opportunity to show their competency in meeting objectives in a variety of ways even though teachers have a tendency to rely on one method of evaluation. One teacher cautions, "We'll get so carried away with assessment that time and paperwork will actually outweigh the teaching of art. Assessment must be kept 'streamlined' so that it remains as a quick (but effective) tool, but not the primary focus of our time with our students. As the current fascination in education with various methods of assessment increases, so does the potential hazard."

To avoid potential hazard, some questions that might be asked when devising a system of assessment are:

- How does the teacher budget time to ensure effective assessment?
- Can a rigidly defined set of criteria for an art project allow for the flexibility of multiple solutions?
- How do we remove the subjectivity of grading and still encourage students to go beyond the standard expectation?

- Is assessment about dissecting the parts or appreciating the whole creative process?

How we design our assessment methods to answer critics of assessment in art will define our future as a vital component of education in U.S. schools. It should be the job of every art educator to remember what it means to be an artist, how every decision is not always easily articulated by words, self-evaluation, rubrics, or a set of criteria. This responsibility often requires doing research, measuring your success and failures, seeking out training, asking for administrative support, and working with peers to get it right.

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